

# Digest of Inspection of School Construction

In response to the request of the Legislative Audit Subcommittee, we have reviewed inspections of school construction projects in several primarily rural school districts in Utah. We have identified concerns in several areas, including the following:

- ▶ Inspections of school building construction may be inadequate and do not always comply with statutory requirements.
- ▶ The role of local building officials, when school districts fail to provide for inspections, is unclear.
- ▶ The Utah State Office of Education can improve its oversight and should consider reorganizing the information provided to districts about inspection requirements.

Because we found confusion and misunderstanding among the school districts' staff, local building officials, and inspectors about their respective roles, responsibilities, and authority, we believe that the **Utah Code** needs to be clarified in places dealing with inspection requirements and responsibilities. Building inspections are required by law to help ensure that construction meets relevant building and safety code standards; inspectors do this by ascertaining that buildings are constructed according to the plans and specifications, which are certified to have met the relevant code requirements.

An additional request was that we should ascertain whether inspectors employed by school districts are subjected to undue pressure to approve substandard work. Only a minority of initial responses from a confidential survey indicated some pressures do exist. We were unable to verify in our follow-up work with respondents that significant pressures have resulted in substandard work being passed.

Our findings are discussed in the full report in the following sections:

- ! **Construction Inspection Is Inadequate in Several Areas.** We have concerns about compliance with and documentation and adequacy of school construction inspections in the majority of primarily rural school districts reviewed in this audit. Some projects were not inspected at all while engineering firms and other personnel did field observations and tests, not inspections, on other projects. In addition, some inspection records were so sketchy and limited that the documentation is insufficient to prove that inspections were done thoroughly or frequently enough. To improve compliance with the law and increase the adequacy of inspections, school districts need to ensure that they use qualified inspectors, give the inspectors the authority needed to perform fully, and file proof of inspection with the local building officials.
- ! **Role of Local Building Officials Needs Clarification.** In situations where neither the

school district nor the state superintendent arrange for inspection of school construction, it appears that the law allows for local building officials to inspect the project. However, the law is somewhat vague and we found that local building officials have not stepped in when districts fail to inspect construction. Frequently, neither district officials nor local building officials understand their respective responsibilities in this area. Clarification in the **Utah Code** is needed of the local building officials' responsibilities to help ensure that school construction is properly inspected.

- ! USOE Oversight Needs to Improve.** Although the USOE obtains some inspection information from school districts when a construction project is planned, the current level of oversight for building inspection is inadequate. The USOE needs to follow up on information submitted by the school districts to ensure that properly qualified inspectors are actually performing the required inspections. In addition, the USOE should develop a comprehensive inspection manual for school districts. This step would gather together relevant information for districts on inspection requirements. Finally, the USOE should give consideration to convening a committee to study school construction inspection issues in an effort to address some of the concerns raised in the report.
- ! Surveys Indicate Most Inspectors Have Not Been Pressured.** While a minority of inspectors responding to a confidential survey indicated they have been pressured to overlook something in an inspection, most inspectors responding did not indicate they have felt undue pressures. In addition, our follow-up work in this area did not verify the existence of a problem; in fact, we found that factors other than pressure were often the issues. Other responses to the survey included concerns that inspections were not frequent or thorough enough and that state level oversight of inspections is inadequate.

#### **Summary of Recommendations:**

1. We recommend that school districts comply with inspection requirements;
2. We recommend that the Legislature clarify **Utah Code** language related to local building officials' authority and responsibility vis-a-vis school construction inspections;
3. We recommend that USOE explore methods to verify that inspections are occurring;
4. We recommend that USOE develop a resource manual on inspections for school districts;
5. We recommend that USOE convene a committee to study inspection issues raised in this report.